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# TALKING BIODIVERSITY

*Getting the message across*

Sandy Gauntlett • Ijahnya Christian • Ehsan Masood • Stas Burgiel • Richard Tarasofsky



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## Introduction

This publication is part of the RSPB's work on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which focuses on protected areas, in particular the need for developed countries to meet their commitments to provide financial support to developing countries.

The Convention on Biological Diversity and other recent international meetings have identified the need to raise much higher awareness among public and decision-makers about biodiversity loss as an urgent priority. The question is how to do it? This is an issue for everyone engaged with conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, not just for the RSPB.

Multiple factors affect biodiversity loss. For example, land use and planning decisions, whether they relate specifically to protected areas or not, affect the rights of many interest groups, as well as the wider community, in some cases the global community that has derived benefits from the earlier use or non-use of the area. In the UK, bird species are declining because of changes in farming practices. Globally, studies indicate that through climate change, our lifestyles are likely to leave some threatened species with nowhere to go when their habitats change.

This publication forms part of an RSPB project which has explored different approaches and ideas that could help biodiversity specialists strengthen their communications strategies. Five individuals were invited to present their personal perspectives. Their articles highlight a wide range of issues, such as the historical factors that continue to affect the rights of indigenous peoples, the role of culture in a small island setting, the roles of scientists and journalists, issues in the US and the importance of economic policy making. An earlier paper commissioned as part of the project drew on strategic brand management from the private sector, exploring how this might be applied to biodiversity.

The views are those of the authors, which may not be the same as the RSPB's.

Joy Hyvarinen  
International Treaties Adviser

July 2004

The views are those of the authors, which may not be the same as the RSPB's.

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# **Te Ao Marama (the world of light): understanding Indigenous biodiversity management in a world under threat**

***Sandy Gauntlett***

## **Introduction**

This paper assumes that co-operation between Indigenous and Non-indigenous knowledge systems is a good thing, that it is necessary for us to be able to communicate and understand different world views in order to preserve the world in which we live. The history of colonization is full of stories of exploitation and appropriation. Thus, this paper starts from a position of conflict, conflict between Indigenous and Non-indigenous knowledge systems and conflict between a history of mistrust and a need to create a future of co-operation. As Indigenous Peoples, we are a repository of centuries of knowledge of the biodiversity which makes up the ecosystems within which we live. This is now being recognised and acknowledged and increasingly we are sought as 'experts'. That this new position of honoured expert comes with strong boundaries is also without doubt. Invariably, there is a conflict between 'national' sovereignty and Indigenous claims to traditional lands and territories. It is important that these conflicts are seen and acknowledged and that this paper is read within the context of those conflicts. Ultimately, the destruction of the world of Indigenous Peoples is a loss for all of us, because its underlying message is that the preservation of unique knowledge and biodiversity is subordinate to the need to establish dominance. This is a dangerous message for us to be passing to our children.

## **Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity**

Inevitably, the history of Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity is one of interdependence and learned sustainability. For any hunter-gatherer or simple agrarian society, the surrounding ecosystem is more than a simple place to live, it is the provider of the sustenance necessary to maintain life. In circumstances where people's ability to feed their children is dependant on the maintenance of the surrounding ecosystem, harsh lessons teach responsible resource management. This is not a claim that species did not become extinct under Indigenous regimes, because of course they did. However, it is a historical fact that the rate of extinction increased with colonisation. This paper seeks to give an insight into the world view that is inherent to Maori and other Indigenous Peoples. It seeks to do this in order that we might gain an understanding of each other that will help us work together to preserve biodiversity.

## **Te Ao Maori (the world of Maori)**

At the heart of the increase in the rate of extinction is the issue of world viewpoint. For most Indigenous Peoples, we see ourselves as being of the earth and an integral part of the ecosystem (Gauntlett, 1998). For Maori as an example, our cosmology teaches us that we are the descendants of supreme beings in the form of Papatuanuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father). The world in which we live, Te Ao Marama (the world of light), was created by the forced separation of these beings by their own children, who were tired of living within a world of darkness (Walker, 1990). The leader of this familial rebellion was Tane Mahuta, atua (lord) of the forests who created the forests and plants to cover his mother's nakedness, which became exposed in Te Ao Marama. He then hungered for companionship and created all of the animals, birds and insects that inhabit the forest. But this did not satisfy his hunger, for these creatures were created out of his own essence (ira atua), and as such were incapable of full communication with their creator. If they were to be able to communicate on the same level, it would have required more of his essence than was able to be given. He then got the idea of shaping a woman out of earth (from the very being of the earth mother) and breathing into this creature his own essence. This woman thus was possessed of ira atua (essence of the lords) and ira tangata (essence of humanity). The rest of the cosmology is full of stories about the descent of humanity from this woman, Hineahuone (earth formed woman) and her creator, Tane Mahuta.



There are several environmental lessons established in this story. For example, the need for sacrifice (the separation of the parents) in order that enlightenment could begin, or the realization that even with enlightenment comes new problems (the sudden visibility of the nakedness of the earth mother), and the message that even a god (for want of a better term) cannot create higher order beings by himself.

This cosmology was for early Maori much more than just the basis of a religion, although that element was certainly present. It was a means of passing knowledge in the form of lessons to be learned from the cosmology (like those above), and it formed the basis of the lore that was the basis of Maori law. There are other messages, like those about the importance of family ties and the maintenance of them, that also influenced environmental protection beliefs (don't forget that humans are the siblings of the trees and birds and plants). And along with the parable-like messages, there developed a system of sustainable resource management based within the belief system underpinned by the cosmology. For example, before a single tree could be cut for use, there was a requirement of ritual karakia (prayer) that was complex and involved. The very nature of this requirement ensured that trees cut were indeed needed and the passage of time in itself taught the need for conservation in order that future needs could be met.

### **Indigenous ethics and accountability**

The ancient social world of the Maori contained and was built on a system of ethics that dictated the way in which people related to each other and the ecosystem within which they lived (Henry, 1999). Central to this system of ethics were the following.

- 1 **Whanaungatanga, the ethic of belonging.** The importance of family and knowing your role (and thus responsibilities) within that family, along with knowing the role of the family.
- 2 **Wairuatanga, the ethic of spirituality.** The ethic that requires a respect for life and the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being of all things and of people as a part of that ecosystem.
- 3 **Kotahitanga, the ethic of solidarity.** Establishes the ethic of co-operation and solidarity, along with a recognition that leadership is not always either solitary or from in front.
- 4 **Kaitiakitanga, the ethic of guardianship.** Establishes a system of responsibilities based around our roles, history, beliefs, etc. It requires a need to look after the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being of things and people, thus building upon the ethics of Wairuatanga, Whanaungatanga, and Kotahitanga.

There are other traditional beliefs that are linked into and around these ethics that helped our ancestors to establish and administer a system of accountability.

According to Shaw (1999), central concepts for accountability included the following:

- 1 **Mana Whenua.** The centrality of the land as the giver and sustainer of life.
- 2 **Tikanga.** The law or the correct way of doing things.
- 3 **Mana Tangata.** The status and position of people; it recognizes the issue of individual autonomy and responsibility.
- 4 **Mana Arahī.** The centrality of leadership and the ability to achieve consensus.
- 5 **Mana Whanau.** The centrality of the family and the leadership roles of elders.
- 6 **Mana Wahine.** The central role of women's contribution and their leadership.
- 7 **Mana Tuku Iho.** The restoration of traditional institutions and systems.

Shaw also defines the meaning of land for Maori in the following quote from the same paper:

'For most Maori, the land is understood to encompass not only the earth, but also lakes, rivers, streams and seas, the air, sky, sun, moon, planets and stars, and the full range of living and non-living entities that inhabit nature. In this all-encompassing view, the land is the source and sustainer of life. In return, people must act as stewards and caretakers of the earth for future generations. Over the past two centuries, Maori relationships with their land have been altered fundamentally by processes that have distorted (and in some cases severed) these relationships. Some Maori have been left with virtually no recognised land base of their own. Even when an exclusive land base exists, it is often very small, a fraction of the people's traditional territories, or has been individualised by the actions of the Maori Land Courts and the imposition of the alien Torrens land title system.' (National sovereignty versus Mana Whenua)

### **Summary**

There can be no doubting that the planet is under threat. Every day, the list of threatened species and ecosystems grows, and the traditional western approach of setting up a system of protected areas that fence off fragile ecosystems from the outside world is failing. Unfortunately, in the rush to create islands of biodiversity for future generations, we have overlooked other issues. These protected areas often cut across the traditional lands and territories of Indigenous People and further increase the alienation of peoples from their lands and knowledge systems.

There has also been a failure to adequately address the twin evils of consumption and corruption. Creating islands of biodiversity within a system that fails to curb the power of the market will not prevent biodiversity extinction. We need to recognise that the market exerts pressure on impoverished and alienated communities to breach (foreign) laws that established these protected areas. Western consumption patterns are at least partially responsible for the creation of biodiversity threats. Globalisation has meant that the market has almost acquired a life of its own, a life often devoid of any system of ethics and with a requirement to produce economic profit without regard for the long-term costs of that profit. The issue of corruption within systems supposedly created to ensure protection is further extending the problem and the face of biodiversity extinction is increasingly wearing the sign of the dollar.

As kaitiaki (guardians) of this planet we need to talk to each other and to acknowledge that we are failing to stem the tide of species extinction. We need to marry the science that provides us with the ability to conduct environmental assessments to the Indigenous belief systems that required us to protect the trees and birds and animals that are a part of our family. Western science may not be the only method by which we can understand the world around us. Indigenous Peoples have lived for millennia without creating the ecological devastation that surrounds us today.

Perhaps the belief that we are an integral part of the ecosystem in which we live and that we have (and indeed should) maintain a symbiotic relationship is not as primitive or heathen as we might want to believe.

We need to examine what we regard as good governance and on what we base those judgements. Shaw (1999) talks about some of these issues in the introduction to *Indigenous Governance and Accountability: Whakahaere a Iwi Whakamarama a Iwi*. 'It denotes a control and power structure where agreed rules are used to make wise decisions on matters that affect the social, cultural and economic well-being of the people.' It is about leadership and efficiency, fairness, integrity, responsibility, decision-making, consultation, direction, structures, processes and traditions. It also has a role in deciding how we use the resources of this planet and who gets to benefit from that usage.

Ultimately, good governance is about sustainability, it is about protecting resources for future generations and ensuring fairness. It is about protecting biodiversity and recognizing the full extent of what biodiversity encompasses. It is about our responsibility to talk to each other and share our world views in order that we might have a world to leave to our children. It is about recognition of past injustices and prevention of future ones. Communicating biodiversity is certainly about counting threatened species, but it is also about counting threatened cultures, languages and beliefs systems and valuing the differing knowledge systems that we all bring with us.

### **Key message for Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity**

If we were only allowed one priority message it would be that alienation of Indigenous Peoples from their traditional lands and territories has increased biodiversity loss and impoverished us all.

For us to better communicate this message, we need to understand the full impacts of this alienation. We need to acknowledge the loss of languages and cultural knowledge systems that in some cases were being developed before many of our Western prophets walked the earth. We need to signal the loss as a loss to us all and to diversity.

We need to recognise the urgency of these issues and to take some actions immediately. Recognition of Indigenous Peoples as kaitiaki (guardians) of unique knowledge systems is a pre-requisite. Action around this would involve support for Indigenous land rights, support for equity between western science and Indigenous knowledge systems, recognition that ecosystems have intrinsic values that cannot be measured in monetary terms, and the developing of new treaties with Indigenous Peoples that address issues of biodiversity loss and equity.

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# **Towards a strategy of cultural inclusion for communicating biodiversity**

*Ijahnya Christian*

## **Literacy for communicating biodiversity**

In the 21st Century, the development of communication strategies to prevent biodiversity loss requires literacy for the effective use of information technology. Computer literacy and access to the Internet are starting points for the generation, retrieval, exchange and management of information for communicating biodiversity locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. At the local level, not even an in-house telephone is adequate for those whose work requires them to make a rapid response to prevent biodiversity loss through protection of endangered species. For example, it is a cellular phone that is needed to buzz during that special weekend dinner or Sunday morning church service to summon assistance for hatchling sea turtles that have been confused by the lighting of coastal development, and have headed away from the sea instead of toward it. This paper therefore recommends mastery of all available communication technologies, including old ones that may still be underutilized by decision-makers, agencies and individuals involved in biodiversity conservation.

In the Caribbean, and in small islands everywhere, the sea is important to people who depend on it for spiritual as well as physical sustenance. Biodiversity communications must strike a balance between terrestrial and marine environments. Coastal development on many of our islands has come to mean tourism development by foreign investors who wield much influence when negotiating their projects with national governments. Yet communication strategies for biodiversity conservation will not be sustainable if they do not incorporate the quality of life of the people most marginalized from the development decision-making process. Unsustainable housing in coastal and low-lying areas increases the vulnerability of the poor, while the development of housing and accommodation for the wealthy often results in habitat destruction. Biodiversity loses either way, and the literacy package must consider the stakes of those who can speak for themselves as well as those who cannot.

The use of popular culture presents excellent opportunities for empowering people to spread the gospel of peace, love and conservation to the world in their own voices. The global impact of reggae music is a testimony of the gift that the Rastafari Nation of the Caribbean has given to the world. In 1995, as I travelled from Anguilla to Beijing for the UN Conference on Women, I listened to reggae music all the way from Los Angeles to Tokyo on Air Japan. While in China, I was pleased to hear the work of a Rastafari brother I know, listed among a top ten of a television music programme being broadcast from the Philippines. Imagine the scope and the impact if the messages imbedded in the music were those in favour of biodiversity.

Literacy for communicating biodiversity is therefore a multi-disciplinary arena in which material from the worlds of science, technology, culture and politics must be used across the spectrum of public education and from basic to tertiary levels. Communications packages designed to reach the people most affected by proposed change must help them participate in shaping the transition from practices and livelihoods that may be familiar but unsustainable to those that are sustainable. Not only must the messages be ones with which people can make a personal connection, but the messengers must be those trusted to act in the recipients' interest. Partnerships and participation must therefore be considered in the communications plan, and sensitivity is required when people of the North develop communications messages for people of the South. New communications material should always be piloted, as any perception of prejudice or patronage can lead to the rejection of an otherwise sound message.

### Challenges and Opportunities (God, sex and money)

- 1 **Flagship species** are usually selected not only on the basis of the threats to their existence or to their status as vulnerable or endangered but also on the basis of their 'sexiness'. Generally speaking, biodiversity tends to be sexy only in a biological and not in a social sense, and biodiversity loss is not sexy at all. A major challenge, particularly in a setting where communicating biodiversity is new, would be how to stimulate the same kind of interest, even controversy, within stakeholder groups and the public minds as is generated by issues surrounding people's faith, sex and money. This is not as flippant as it sounds because preliminary research into the cultures to be impacted will indicate what it is that excites passions, that animates discussion and that motivates people to act to prevent biodiversity loss. If there is unease with using the notion that sex sells, there is always God, and people of faith in any religion will personalise the message that comes from the word of their God.
- 2 **Prioritising** biodiversity in the education and development agenda is necessary if the issues are to be brought to public attention in ways that are parallel to:
  - a) the wars against terrorism and drugs, in terms of the level of resources and the rigour deployed, but not in terms of the loss of rights and the victimisation of ordinary citizens
  - b) the invasion of Iraq, for its urgency, but with far greater transparency and the use of methods that elevate its participants (should communicating biodiversity strive to shock and awe?)
  - c) the HIV/AIDS pandemic, for the global attention it receives in relation to other endemic and chronic diseases that can have comparable impact.
- 3 **Improving access** – synergies between new technologies and the mass media must be fully exploited in recognition of the families and communities not yet accessing the net, the official language, or even the written word. Still on the fringes are those with disabilities, whose numbers may be too low to make their participation 'viable' in settings such as a small island or a rural village. Young people are now making CD recordings from their bedrooms and their abilities to manipulate information and communications technology make them ideal for communicating biodiversity to their peers.
- 4 **The costs** of communicating biodiversity using state-of-the-art technology are likely to be high. Cost sharing within the context of partnerships with the private sector is to be encouraged, and this should receive careful treatment in the development of a strategy for communicating biodiversity. The processes of seeking, building and establishing such partnerships, as well as other types of alliances, all present opportunities for communicating biodiversity. It would be useful to single out the tourism sector for partnership because of the high stakes this sector has in protecting the natural resource base on which the industry depends. Partnerships work best when mutual benefits are determined. The current emphasis on sustainable tourism also provides a strong and viable opportunity for communicating biodiversity.

Hoteliers can reduce operational costs by implementing sustainable management practices that conserve ecosystems to protect habitats for various species. Whether it is a sea turtle nesting on a hotel beach or a hotel developed on a nesting beach depends on whether the communicator is the manager or the mother turtle, but when the natural phenomenon becomes a tourist attraction, it is to be preserved at all costs and communicating biodiversity then becomes an investment. A huge part of the cost will be the time it takes for the paradigmatic shift from thinking of biodiversity as a threat to development to recognition of biodiversity as a resource for development. When the range of options is limited, the use of the original, low-cost communications technology – the drum, may just be a novel means by which local communities can be involved in communicating biodiversity with each other and within the context of the tourism industry.

### **Past mistakes**

- Discourse that pits environment against development.
- Let's blame the poor for environmental degradation and biodiversity loss and let's not plan for them but with them.
- The law is not enough and especially so when it cannot be enforced.
- The one-sided North-South flow of information.
- The Caribbean electorate has not demanded that political leaders appreciate the role and value of biodiversity and the true costs of its impact by development.

### **Successes**

- Growing acceptance of the concepts of sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable livelihoods.
- Communicating biodiversity is being considered in the framework of sustainable development.
- Civil society is being given a voice in processes of global environmental governance.
- Marketing of products where animals have not been used in testing – this can be extended to products that have been manufactured with conservation objectives.

### **Key messages to communicate**

While those initiating the communication may appreciate the anthropogenic impacts on biodiversity, people are also concerned about their present quality of life. This tension must become a central theme of the message to be communicated, and it must be addressed in a manner that can lead to desired change. Decision-makers must be sensitive to the fact that the meeting of basic needs cannot wait until sustainable policies are in place and that living tends to take precedence over legislation. One critical demand that must be made of decision-makers is for renewable energy to be made widely accessible to all as a developmental goal. A strategy for communicating biodiversity can present a range of opportunities for public and community education about conservation. Traditional knowledge must be considered, but it is not always flawless, so in the development of a strategy for communicating biodiversity it would be wise to use what is 'known' to build in and build up to the unknown.

Here are some key messages for communicating biodiversity.

- 1 Renewability – natural resources are generally not renewable, but our cultural resources are, and biodiversity conservation cannot be separated from people's faith, understanding of science, politics and culture.
- 2 Interdependency – the interconnectedness of the species that share the resources of planet Earth (the Caribbean Sea) and the rapidity of species loss.
- 3 Cost-benefit analysis – development must properly count its costs so that perception can match reality when describing the benefits.
- 4 Consumption patterns – changes in personal living and consumption patterns are required. This is not about them (the poor, Haiti, illegal immigrants, children, the Government, the North, etc) but about us (the rich, powerful and influential, the South, etc).
- 5 It is about people – people in local communities can and must be able to access and participate in processes of global governance.

### **How can this be done better?**

Basic Tools for communicating with decision-makers – PowerPoint presentations, when used effectively bring a measure of sophistication and ease when communicating with decision-makers. The politician may have no expertise in the field, the technocrat is expected to have a high level of expertise, and PowerPoint is a communications-friendly way to impart serious messages in an

interesting way in a limited time. Teleconferencing skills and facilities can strengthen and enhance regional civil society lobbying of regional governmental organisations and of decision-making bodies in other parts of the world. Via the big screen, civil society can negotiate with environmental ministers the terms of engagement to implement the UK Environment Charter for the Overseas Territories, for example, when there is still resistance to having our warm bodies in the room. There is need to weigh the cost of this option against the cost and impact of face-to-face meetings, though nothing can replace these. At the international level, e-mail and the Internet are now basic tools – the joiner's plane, the mason's trowel, the PowerPoint presentation and the voice for global governance.

Radio rules the rural world – the effectiveness of radio as a primary medium of communication in the developing world and particularly in rural areas should be readily recognised. The use of radio creates immediate access by and for people without electricity and without literacy skills. Radio can be used for informal education of the individual at home or at work, for non-formal education in structured settings or in the formal education system. In the Caribbean region, the dominance of the African oral tradition is evident not only in everyday interactions but in the primary agents of socialisation and influence, including the church, the school, the political platform and the calypso. The calypsonian, like the conscious reggae artiste, is the messenger trusted to make critical social commentary on behalf of the silent masses. Church preachers quote calypsonians in the pulpit, and when politicians ban calypsos that have been critical of them and their policies, increased sales of the banned calypso are guaranteed. The messages of each of these powerful agents of changes can be brought to communities and countries by radio. The problem with radio is that information flows from only one side and the possibilities for feedback are limited. In addition, if the messages being communicated are not directly related to the livelihoods and bread and butter issues of the people whose lives they are intended to impact, they are likely to receive a lower level of attention than is necessary.

Negotiating partnerships and policies for biodiversity – if we swing from the rural poor to the other extreme of the corporate wealthy, the 'what's in it for me' question must be a factor of the terms of engagement, even if it cannot be answered. In small islands, local businesses are swamped by requests for sponsorships from every angle because they are visible and present entities that contrast with the invisible faces of players in the offshore finance industry. The communication needs to prepare governments for negotiating with new investors in favour of biodiversity so that a developer that plans to acquire one hundred acres can be reasonably required to additional acreage to be set aside for biodiversity conservation. This may be the only option for conservation on a small island with limited land. In this way, the developer has the opportunity to become a responsible social corporate citizen from the outset, the landowner gets a fair market price for his/her land, and the government can take the credit for awarding conservation the place it deserves in national development.

### **Summary of immediate and short-term activities**

- 1 Enlist the services of people like me to research what works best for communicating biodiversity in each country, region, group targeted for impact. Determine what forms of communication have been most effective for what communities over time and consider the use of participatory methodologies (learning by doing).
- 2 Begin the dialogue to create alliances with the mass media and corporate sector to identify their stakes in the development of partnerships for communicating biodiversity.
- 3 Invite and promote innovation – employ cultural workers in the process of communicating biodiversity in recognition of the effective use of visual and performing arts, indigenous and nation languages in communicating other messages.
  - Theatre is still an underutilized medium.

- Television, film and theatre (news, scriptwriters and actors, special events, video documentaries using people in local communities).
- Famous people – (find each country's David Attenborough).
- Manufacture and distribution of toys and games (computer and others), for the children and families markets, to promote biodiversity knowledge and conservation. Remember those Ninja Turtles and the wide range of products developed after the movie? Think of more recent examples.
- Case studies can be a creative and effective means of highlighting biodiversity when documenting lessons learned from people's loss, and they can also be used to make the case for biodiversity conservation.



# Reflections on communicating biodiversity

**Ehsan Masood**

Almost a decade ago, I found myself in Bratislava, capital of the newly-independent republic of Slovakia, for the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. I was then a correspondent for the science journal *Nature*. This was one of my first outings to a UN convention and, my editors figured, would be a good opportunity for me to learn more about international conservation science and policy. The UN biodiversity convention is a remarkable instrument and we were keen to be able to see at first hand how ministers, their advisors, scientists and civil society can work together to make policies that are aimed at protecting the interests of people as well as the planet.

The convention is perhaps one of the most far-sighted – and potentially far-reaching – of all the global treaties that have been negotiated in recent times. It shows how countries can safeguard the rights of the poorest in today's world, without compromising the rights of successor generations to live in a healthy environment. Its member states promise not just to conserve biological diversity, but use it sustainably and share its benefits in an equitable way.

Aside from overpriced hotels, the absence of the idea of vegetarian food and the pleasure of a round-the-clock minder, my abiding memory of the event was the impenetrability of the discussion. Most of us in the press corps were well used to covering complex scientific issues. But we were unprepared for the chessboard that is international biodiversity policy. We didn't know the extent to which conservation is a high-stakes political game with its own rules, language and cast of actors.

To give them their due, most of the convention's delegates were very accessible and happy to talk with reporters. But their willingness to engage in some ways only made our job more difficult. They had little awareness of the needs of the media, and often found it difficult to unpack the complexity of the discussion. They were also understandably pressed for time and had to interrupt interviews to head off for the next meeting of the G77 (Group of 77) or other negotiating group. With deadlines looming, we were reduced to interviewing each other (as journalists often do), to make sense of the meeting for our readers, listeners and viewers. With the luxury of hindsight, it is easier for me to see what went wrong at Bratislava: there were no communications officers; no professional experts who could mediate between the press and the delegates.

This changed at my next environmental reporting assignment – discussions leading up to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change – which was a thoroughly professional affair in terms of media relations. But I know for a fact that for several of my colleagues, Bratislava had left a lasting imprint and the experience was to be their last foray into the field. In future they would – and did – restrict their reporting on biodiversity to the plight of endangered cuddly animals. Trying to factor in people and politics into stories about pandas with droopy-looking eyes would forever remain an impossible challenge.

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The ethic of biodiversity, as we know, goes beyond conservation. It is, among other things, an issue of lifestyles. Whether burning fossil fuels, or clearing land for crops and grazing, our present lifestyles do not support the aims of the UN convention, which means that we need to make certain changes if we want this planet to be inhabitable for both present and future generations.

The mass media is perhaps the main source for ordinary people for information on issues that concern public policy. In the UK, members of the media often have a less-than-healthy disregard for people in authority. There are many reasons for this, but what it means is that genuinely fair and balanced reporting of UK domestic and foreign politics is now increasingly difficult to find.

The biodiversity world is almost the exception to this. Relations between journalists and their sources are on the whole healthy. We journalists know that conservationists are well-intentioned, that their claims are (mostly) backed up by good research. Perhaps because of this, journalists tend to cover conservation and development stories in a mostly uncritical way. And the communications departments from all the major conservation NGOs can all boast a sheaf of print and video clips as testament to their ability to generate good press coverage for the causes they support.

However, good journalism is only half the story. Not only do we want readers and viewers to take home an accurate message, we simultaneously want them to do something about it. This means that in addition to the support of good journalists, communicating a message in order to change behaviour also needs input from professionals from advertising, marketing and public relations – people who know a thing or two about communicating for behaviour change.

Before conservationists take the brave leap into the PR (public relations) pool, however, a cautionary tale is in order.

A decade ago, the UK science community felt – as many conservationists do now – that they ought to be doing more to promote public interest in their work. Part of the reason for this was to get more positive media coverage of science; part of the reason was to attract more young people to science careers, and part of it was to help maintain a solid base of government funding – particularly since the decline in state support during the previous administration. In many ways, this was another example of communicating to change behaviour.

Many organisations and initiatives were launched as a result. The media boosted the numbers of science correspondents on their payroll and invited scientists to work in newsrooms on short sabbatical breaks. Government research funding councils encouraged grantees to spend a (small) proportion of research grants on sharing their findings with the public. Organizations such as London's Science Media Centre were set up, which allowed scientists to present their side of the story during public debates that involve science. And, just as in conservation, science journalists enjoy a good relationship with members of the science community.

So here lies the rub: scientists (reluctantly) engaged experts from public relations to boost their image, and put across their side of the story, yet survey after survey shows that members of the public are less likely to agree with mainstream scientists on issues such as genetically-modified foods and nuclear power. On both issues, the Government has had to bow to public opinion and freeze its plans to commercialise GM foods and expand its nuclear power programme.

It is worth pointing out that both those examples are ones where environmentalist groups helped to shape public opinion against the Government and the mainstream UK science community. But there remains a perception among ordinary members of the public that if an organisation needs to employ the techniques of advertising and public relations, it has something to hide.

This is what conservation groups need to be aware of when engaging more deeply with advertising and PR. It doesn't mean they shouldn't employ PR professionals to help get their message across.

Quite the opposite, for theirs is a skill that we desperately need. But they should do so knowing that the field has both strengths and weaknesses.

In working with my colleagues from the world of communication – both journalists and PR experts – conservation groups should be mindful of a few dos and don'ts:

- Don't try to reduce your message to a sound-bite. The public will see through it, and are not afraid of handling complexity, if properly explained.
- Avoid using jargon.
- Be patient when explaining something to a non-expert. Often, they are experts themselves, but in a different subject.
- Before being interviewed by a journalist, insist on your quote being replayed before it is printed, or broadcast.
- Answer a question truthfully. If you don't know the answer, say so.
- Insist on proofreading any press-release that has been written by your in-house PR/communications team. Correct factual errors, but leave the language to them. They know their readers better than you do.

# Hearts and minds, dollars and cents: communicating biodiversity in the US

*Stas Burgiel*

In the United States, the original peak of environmental activism came in the late 1960s and 1970s with the advent of a range of legislation and regulations to protect endangered species, ensure air and water quality, and assess detrimental impacts from major projects on public and private lands. Yet, three decades later these same protections are being assailed and weakened in a wide array of direct and indirect legislative and regulatory action. While the US environmental community has worked to avert such revisionism and to protect watersheds, forests, wetlands and other sensitive habitats through lobbying Congress and the courts, it is still struggling to communicate the importance of biological diversity to the broader public in a manner that generates votes and long-term change.

Looking at the global scale, US environmentalism enjoys many benefits over activities in other countries given a longer history of activism, a broad array of legislation and enforcement mechanisms, a literate populace and varying degrees of public, private and charitable funding for environmental protection efforts. However, many of the struggles in protecting the environment in the US mirror those in other countries, particularly in terms of educating the public about the concept of biodiversity, its intrinsic and use values, and means for its preservation and long-term maintenance. Effective means to communicate biodiversity need to mesh the surface issues of semantics and terminology with more deeply held values to create an overall message that induces people to change their behavior. The present discussion will address these issues specifically within the US context, but the underlying tools and approaches would, I hope, be applicable to other cultural and political contexts.

## **Terminology and tone, complexity and cognition**

One of the hallmarks of American society is the degree to which it is mediated, and within that how companies use advertising to relay their message and prompt the public to buy their products and services. While focus groups and product sampling have long been staples of the private sector, it is only recently that non-profit groups have also started using such tools at a broader level to craft a message and to convince people to act accordingly. Recently, a number of such studies have addressed a range of environmental issues including biodiversity, endangered species and climate change. Across these differing issues, a number of common themes emerge which are key to messaging and generating change.

**The doom and gloom scenario:** frequently, environmental groups choose the shock approach, for example telling their constituents that on a daily basis perhaps 75 species will go extinct, over 100,000 acres of rainforest will be clearcut, 215 million tons of topsoil will wash away and 4 million tons of carbon will be emitted into the atmosphere. The result – environmental catastrophe – if you don't sign a petition, write to your representative in Congress or give \$20 to the non-profit in question. Research has shown that far from mobilizing people to action, this 'worst of all possible worlds' approach can overwhelm and paralyze. How can such a big problem be solved by one letter or a donation? Rather than motivating people to seek and support solutions themselves, such approaches can lead to doubts that any solution will prevail. Instead of presenting doom and gloom, the audience needs to be informed and empowered to act.

**Cognitive frames:** media studies have increasingly focused on how people use cognitive frames to process information, compare it to existing assumptions and experiences, and then make decisions

about the world around them. This process frequently relies on identifying with ingrained moral values (freedom, community, security, justice, responsibility, stewardship) rather than an objective, logical weighing of evidence, consequences and action. Thus, effective communication needs to relate a problem, such as biodiversity loss, to people's basic values and belief structures. Using an appeal to notions of justice, security or responsibility, one can overlay this with a message that is more specific to biodiversity conservation, whether it be a specific species, ecosystem or natural habitat.

**Responsible Stewardship:** in the context of messaging environmental protection, the particular moral values that strike a cord among the average American relate to concepts of responsibility, accountability and future generations. This has been parlayed into the promotion of responsible stewardship over the plants, animals and habitat that surround and sustain us. While policy-makers can refer to the 2010 target of the Convention on Biological Diversity and reducing the rate of biodiversity loss, people need to identify with something tangible. They need to understand that once a species is lost it cannot be brought back, that all species big and small are part of the web of life, and that we never know which species of plant or animal may be important for future medicinal, hygienic or other industrial uses.

**Terminology:** the US does not have a national 'biodiversity' law, instead it has legislation that addresses issues like endangered species, wetlands, forests, air and water quality, and coastal development. While some might argue that many of these laws were on the books before the term biodiversity came into general use, others have suggested that the focus on a particular species or wetland habitat allows for a deeper resonance or attachment within the individual. Focus group studies in the US have shown that biodiversity as a term is overly abstracted or too technical for many to conceive. For example, while 'biological diversity' comes across as a vague scientific term, 'web of life' provides a readily identifiable analogy that can be easily understood.

These basic ideas about the use of language and identification of basic values are critically important in getting an audience to listen to and internalise information about biodiversity and habitat protection. Environmental groups and officials cannot simply hope to put the information out there and assume that it will be readily consumed and interpreted. Refining messaging skills is crucial given the vast amount of mediated information that bombards the average citizen on a daily basis. However, moral suasion cannot be the only instrument in the toolbox to induce change.

### **Putting two and two together: the valuation of biodiversity**

Moral arguments for conserving biodiversity accord well with most environmental groups, arguably because of the basic alignment of core underlying values and objectives. More controversial has been the use of valuation tools, commonly put in the form of economic indicators, to address environmental issues. Thus, dollar figures are put to the supposed worth of an ecosystem service or natural resource, and to the cost of invasive species or pollution effects on human health. However, many of these figures are aggregate and leave little impression on one's day-to-day reality. For example, the gross estimate of the \$137 billion price tag attached to invasive species in the US does not come across in terms of additional costs in the grocery store (impacts on food production), water bill (availability and purification), taxes (local and national control and management), health care (introduced pathogens and food-borne disease) or recreational opportunities (loss of intact native forestlands, grasslands or waterways).

This is not just a problem for the US, as many environmental problems and related demographic trends in America are also reflected in the rest of the world. Urban populations are rising as people leave rural and remote areas in pursuit of jobs, education or entertainment and cultural stimuli. The US also sets the standard for consumption that millions and millions seek to emulate in the rest of the

world. Thus, the environmental problems compound as we are increasingly detached from the inputs that are sourcing our consumption – paper from the forests, crops and meat from industrial agriculture, seafood from depleted fisheries, and all sorts of synthetics produced from petroleum and other products mined from the earth. On the output end, we are also divorced from our waste stream, as our last memories of a product go as far as the sink drain or garbage truck.

Unfortunately these processes of extraction, production and excretion have profound immediate and indirect impacts on biodiversity, whether direct habitat loss from development, overexploitation of commercially valuable species or more insidious ecological impacts from acid rain, invasive species, eutrophication or desertification. So how can such problems be communicated in a way that allows and requires the individual to consider and effectively relate the available data on potential costs with explicit options for action? For example, faced with a \$6 billion price tag to construct a new water filtration system, New York City and the citizens of New York state opted for a host of land purchases, conservation easements, runoff controls and other wastewater management tools to protect the surrounding watershed and allow for natural water-filtering by the region's land-based ecosystems, wetlands and waterways. The decisive factor was a comparable price tag of \$255 million plus annual tax credits.

This case is commonly cited in the literature of valuation and ecosystem services, and presents a clear situation with easily assessed costs. Yet it still remains at a fairly macro-level divorced in relevance from people's everyday choices. If people are motivated by their pocket books (as well as their conscience), the challenge remains to illustrate incentives, costs and choices around the value of protecting a particular species (the spotted owl), preserving an ecosystem service (pollination) or halting destructive practices (driving an SUV) that the average person will consider and hopefully bear. Full cost accounting of externalities, environmental audits and valuation are some of the relevant buzzwords in the academic literature, yet they need a greater presence and application to enter mainstream consideration. Knowledge on immediate costs needs to be complemented by corresponding activities that an individual can take, such as purchasing alternative products (organic produce, renewable energy) or acting in an environmentally responsible manner (incentives for recycling, public referenda on municipal bonds financing strategic conservation activities).

### **Education for the 7th generation**

Attending to moral values and people's wallets is a short-term approach for addressing the much larger issue of internalising the value of biodiversity into our psyches as an individual, as a resident of a particular state or region, and as a country. The reality for why 'biological diversity' is such an abstract term to most American adults goes back to elementary education about biology and natural systems. Teaching youngsters about biodiversity and the web of life with concrete examples from the world around them, whether the wetland outside the school or the city parks as a refuge for migratory birds, is fundamental to building a long-term constituency interested in and committed to environmental protection.

Such attention to the education of youth speaks to the broader conception of re-introducing a long-range timeframe into our thinking and ensuring that our youth educate their sons and daughters, and hopefully their mothers and fathers as well. The Iroquois, a tribe of native American people inhabiting the New York region, instilled this principle in their decision-making structures: 'In our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations'. With the destruction of most Iroquois and the rapid Europeanisation of the American continent has come an ethos of individualism and immediate gratification. We may still value community, but our personal consumption choices are generally in the here and now and do not consider the build-up of pesticides in soils, CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, or stresses on remaining frontier forests halfway around the world.

Instilling this longer-term generational and world view is a major challenge, yet it needs to be kept in mind as we appeal to the immediate values and cost-benefit calculations in our daily practices.

Our ability to effectively communicate biodiversity needs to appeal to a personal sense of responsible stewardship for local as well as global resources. Beyond education, the message from environmental groups, officials and other concerned citizens should include viable actions that empower and enable individuals to take the first step in altering personal consumption and broadening political activity. The options for action have to be appropriate for the particular audience, which in the US context is an increasingly urbanized population largely detached from a physical connection to natural ecosystems. Generally, Americans are more able to induce change by modifying their spending habits or targeting their votes in comparison to having a direct role in protecting a particular species or habitat. This flows into tailoring work on valuation and full cost accounting that presents information to Americans and consumers in an easily digestible form. Such initial steps ultimately need to be set along a course incorporating improved education about biodiversity and human dependence upon it, that will lead to a second step, a third step and thereby many further steps on into successive generations.

# Communicating international biodiversity policy to international economic decision-makers

*Richard Tarasofsky*

At the Seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP), the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) considered issues relating to international economic policy – particularly international trade. These emerging issues arose in several agenda items: protected areas, alien species, agriculture, and intellectual property rights. It is both logical and appropriate for parties to the Convention to consider these matters; after all, economic factors are increasingly recognised as important elements in the overall framework under which the conservation and use of biological resources takes place. Economics influence not only the rate of which species are used, but also the rate at which habitat loss takes place (eg subsidies in the agriculture sector). Globalisation has increased the quantum and impact of economic factors on biodiversity. For example, the increased movement of goods and services around the world creates pathways for invasive alien species, while the international harmonisation of key economic norms, such as intellectual property rights, create incentives/disincentives for sustainable use and equitable benefit sharing.

So surely, the attention paid at the CBD COP to economic issues is to be considered as positive. Surely, it reflects the increasing sophistication of the biodiversity policy community to move away from its habit of focusing only on species and ecosystems. Surely, this is maturity triggered by the modern nature of the CBD to be not only an 'environmental' agreement, but also one that addresses 'sustainable development'.

These are all valid points. But it is also worth asking, 'will any of this be meaningful at the end of the day?' Indeed, despite all these positive steps, the CBD is still not perceived as a serious 'economic' instrument, or even a serious 'development' one. And so long as the CBD is a process for developing messages aimed primarily at the biodiversity policy-making community, its influence will be limited. A sophisticated and robust communications approach will be necessary to break out of this box.

At present, the CBD is facing an important implementation challenge across the whole range of its agenda. Expectations of those involved in that process are vast – as indeed is warranted by the breadth of the Convention's terms. After all, the Convention not only covers the conservation of biological diversity, but also key development issues such as sustainable use of biological resources, equitable benefit sharing arising out of access to genetic resources, and protection of traditional and local knowledge. However, the impact of the CBD on the ground is very hard to assess – particularly in those areas that are covered by economic policy processes, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Bretton Woods institutions. Indeed, so far, the actual substance of much of the CBD's work on economic issues has been relatively timid.

One indication of how the CBD is not perceived as a serious development process is that the contributions made by the UK Department for International Development towards CBD does not count towards the UK's overseas development assistance target.<sup>1</sup> While this may actually be beneficial to the CBD process, in the sense that those funds may not compete with development budget lines, the disadvantage of placing CBD issues in a separate policy space – away from mainstream development issues – is that the CBD may be sidelined and marginalised. One area where it runs a real risk of marginalisation is the area of forests. Despite having a detailed work programme on forest

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication from Steve Bass, DFID, July 2004.



biodiversity, the CBD is still perceived by many national forest policy makers as an 'environmental' convention that may be appropriate for setting norms on species that live amongst the trees, but not the trees themselves. In other words, the CBD is considered by many to be inappropriate for handling the social and economic aspects of forests.

There are a number of reasons for this overall phenomenon. Firstly, the 'weakness' of the CBD's obligations, in that the Convention does not create clear, measurable targets, leaves the choice of implementation measures to the individual party, and qualifies its requirements by phrases such as 'as appropriate'. Although economic factors will influence achieving the CBD's objectives, the mandate of the CBD to address these issues head-on is in many cases unclear (exceptions include incentive measures and, to some extent, intellectual property rights). Furthermore, CBD negotiators often lack the expertise and negotiating mandate from their capitals to fully address the complex economic issues involved. Indeed, many CBD negotiators lack political clout in their capitals to influence foreign economic policy. All of this adds up to a lack of political will to take strong decisions on economic issues.

Clearly, a lot needs to happen on the normative and procedural level before the CBD will become an important player on economic issues. But even if those steps are taken, and indeed, during the process in which those steps are taken, CBD policy-makers must become much more strategic in their communications approach so as to become much more influential on economic matters.

Achieving this will be complex and difficult – this challenge contains both external and internal aspects. CBD policy makers must ensure that decisions and measures taken in other fora do not undermine its objectives, but rather support them. This is an enormous challenge, which will largely depend on the CBD building credibility as a serious economic factor that can influence other processes. In great measure, this will entail focused and nuanced communications approaches to economic decision-makers, on an issue-by-issue basis. At the same time, the CBD negotiators ought to seize the internal opportunities to take economic decisions that directly flow from the CBD mandate. This is also a challenging task, both in defining the appropriate boundaries of CBD action, and then taking a sophisticated approach within these limits. Effective communication with economic policy makers will help define these boundaries, and possibly facilitate developing economic-based policy tools.

Turning to the external agenda, where communications will be crucial, CBD policy-makers should become better versed in the agenda of international economic bodies, such as the WTO, in order to exert influence over their development. Focusing on the WTO, several relevant parts of their agenda are apparent, including the following items: the relationship between multilateral environmental agreements and WTO rules, agriculture liberalisation, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, and instruments such as labelling, which may be considered technical barriers to trade.

Several actions might be taken to influence the WTO process. Firstly, biodiversity policy makers should engage with economic decision-makers at the national level, to help influence their national economic priorities, and consequently, their negotiating positions in the WTO. This cannot be underestimated, since one of the main root causes of potential conflicts between WTO rules and environmental objectives is the lack of national co-ordination on trade and environment policy. Secondly, CBD policy-makers must develop trade-related decisions and recommendations that more closely respond to the current WTO agenda. In both cases, biodiversity policy makers ought to be focused on concrete issues that WTO negotiators need to decide, and ought to be able to transmit key messages in time to be inputted into those negotiations.

In both cases, the CBD policy community should aspire to be a credible voice on how economic policy making will impact on the goals of the CBD. It should seek to use its expertise to both provide information and make any consequent policy recommendations. Doing so will require biodiversity policy makers to become more adept at analysing complex international economic policy issues and delivering the results in the language that trade policy makers can use. Acquiring this expertise will involve considerable investment of time and resources. The high barriers to entry set up by the WTO, and its national negotiators will compound these difficulties. For example, despite the fact that the CBD Conference of Parties has regularly requested observer status for several WTO bodies, the WTO has not acceded to these. More significant is the overall culture of intransparency in making economic policy, even in the domestic arena of most countries. However, by the same token, the WTO is not competent to make sophisticated decisions on biodiversity, although many of its results will impact on biodiversity. The CBD policy community must assert itself to ensure that the WTO outcomes are as supportive to CBD objectives as possible.

The key message that the CBD policy-makers need to get out is that they are serious about confronting economic issues. An important component of doing so is to improve communication flows to international economic policy-makers. There are several short-term steps that might be taken to enhance this. One might be to become more engaged in efforts to develop and undertake sustainability impact assessments of trade liberalisation. The methodologies are considered to be relatively weak, vis-à-vis biodiversity aspects, and biodiversity data is often lacking. Another tact might be to involve trade officials and experts in biodiversity process, such as developing national biodiversity strategies, or even as part of national delegations to CBD meetings. Although this has occasionally taken place, a more concerted effort may well enhance learning between the two policy communities. Similarly, biodiversity policy researchers should seek opportunities to develop non-traditional collaborations with influential economic policy researchers on topical issues. Indeed, biodiversity NGOs should seek out opportunities to develop key messages to economic policy makers in collaboration with NGOs specialising in human development. Finally, policy dialogues, which bring together economic and biodiversity policy makers – at regional and global levels – may be influential.

In sum, the biodiversity policy community needs to build on the basis it already has – and indeed its mandate – to become an important player on economic policy. Doing so will require becoming more savvy about how it communicates its policy messages. This will be complex, and difficult, not only because of the nature of the issues, but also because of the difficulties in penetrating those policy-making processes. Nonetheless, for the CBD to fulfil its objective of being a true sustainable development instrument, the proper investments to communicate effectively with economic policy makers must be made. The experience of the Biosafety Protocol indicates that the biodiversity policy-making community can be effective in taking economic decisions. Mainstreaming a more influence-oriented approach to economic policy issues throughout the Convention process will be dependent on using the right communications tools and techniques to reach economic policy makers.